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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a project to identify and pilot the most appropriate forms of learning support for students with specific learning difficulties. The specific focus is dyslexia among adult basic education students. The document suggests first that the tutor's awareness of specific learning difficulties be developed through background information in written language processing and learning to collect a history/profile through student interviews. A checklist of features common to dyslexic students is provided. A diagnostic method is then based on a miscue analysis of the student's reading, an error analysis of the student's spelling in a dictation, and an analysis of the student's free writing. Two approaches to developing learning support for students with specific learning difficulties are discussed: setting up specialist learning support classes and working within literacy classes. The importance of establishing a spelling program is also addressed. A brief summary is then provided of the main points that emerged as learning strategies were developed in the areas of handwriting, writing, and reading and study skills. Practical ideas are offered for establishing a learning support class and providing learning support within literacy classes. (YLB)

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Specific Learning Difficulties

How can you identify students with specific learning difficulties? What teaching strategies work well for such students? Practical advice on both subjects is offered by Cynthia Klein, Co-ordinator of the ILEA's Learning Difficulties Support Service (at the Language and Literacy Unit), and, recently, ALBSU project worker.

Background

Many tutors working in basic education are bewildered and frustrated by students who, although often bright and articulate, do not seem to improve much no matter what teaching methods are used.

The ALBSU project in specific learning difficulties was initiated precisely because of growing awareness that a number of students in literacy schemes were not making the progress expected in spite of their obvious potential or were seriously underachieving in jobs or education because of persistent spelling difficulties.

The project was set up in four Adult Education Institutes within the Inner London Education Authority and ran from March 1986 to March 1988. The aims of the project were:

1. To identify and pilot the most appropriate forms of learning support provision for students with specific learning difficulties, including diagnosis.
2. To provide specialist training for literacy and other tutors working with such students.

At the outset of the project, the project workers were given intensive training in language processing, diagnostic methods and teaching approaches for students with specific difficulties. This training was provided by the co-ordinator of the Learning Support Service, part of ILEA's Language and Literacy Unit.

The Students

Students with specific learning difficulties, commonly known as dyslexia, are those who have some interference in the basic processes involved in using language, i.e. perceptual/motor/linguistic processes. (Tarnapol and Tarnapol 1976). This means that when handling language the student has fewer cues available than other learners and therefore often fails to learn by ordinary teaching approaches. In order to learn, such students need different, more structured strategies.

These difficulties are *independent* of school experience, social, economic or emotional factors or intelligence. It is generally estimated that 4% to 10% of the population experience these difficulties to some degree. Certainly in an area such as adult literacy we are likely to find a much higher proportion of students with these problems.

Identifying Students

We began the project with an emphasis on developing awareness in tutors of specific learning difficulties and how to identify students with such difficulties.

We found:

1. that once tutors were aware of the sorts of learning patterns these students exhibit many realised that they have or previously had such students in their classes and had often been frustrated at their inability to help them
2. that once a tutor identified and worked with one dyslexic student, s/he was quick to spot other students with similar problems.

Initially, we gave tutors some background in written language processing to give them a basis for understanding the *specific* and *persistent* nature of these difficulties. Some examples might be:

- visual memory problems affecting word recognition, such as a post-literacy level student who persistently fails to recognise common words in print
- auditory perceptual confusions resulting in spellings with significant sounds or syllables missing or disordered
- visual-motor tracking problems resulting in students losing their place when reading, spelling or copying, resulting in missing out or adding letters or words.

We also found it useful to collect a learning *history/profile* through interviewing the student.

Such a learning history profile might reveal, for example, that a student had difficulties learning to read in infant school and received remedial help. It might show the student's continuing frustration in failing to 'catch' spelling year after year or consistent problems in controlling his/her pen when trying to write.

It might also show ambidexterity, confusions between left and right, an inability to memorise the alphabet or multiplication tables, and difficulties learning to tell the time on an analogue watch.

It might reveal someone who is good at visual-spatial skills, like drawing or design, but unable to memorise spelling patterns; or a student poor at learning from generalisation or rules although quick to grasp concepts; one who is often unable to follow a sequence but can see 'wholes' or patterns, or a 'quick forgetter'.

Such a history/profile is the first step in identifying students with specific difficulties. We believe it is also extremely valuable to observe a student's learning in understanding why a student is having difficulties with reading, writing and/or spelling.

There are a number of features common to dyslexic students although not all may be true of every student.

How do I know if a student is dyslexic?

It is not always easy to identify dyslexic students, but the following are common features which can alert tutors to the *possibility* that a student is dyslexic.

Remember – it is a *pattern* of difficulties that you are looking for and you may need to observe the student's learning over a period of time.

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Checklist

- shows significant discrepancy between verbal and written performance
- experiences persistent or severe problems with spelling, even with 'easy' or common words. Spelling may also be erratic
- has difficulty getting ideas onto paper
- has problems ordering things sequentially
- loses place easily in a series, or in reading
- finds it difficult to memorise or remember facts, new terminology, names etc.
- may easily misread or miscopy
- may experience left-right confusions
- handwriting may be 'messy', poorly constructed or immature
- written work may fail to adequately express student's understanding, ideas or vocabulary
- has persistent problems with sentence structure, punctuation and organisation of written work – *not* due to lack of experience
- has trouble generalising, or acquiring and applying rules
- has difficulty 'seeing' his/her errors
- does not seem to learn by 'ordinary' teaching methods
- may be described as a 'quick forgetter'.

Diagnosis

Once we had raised awareness among tutors we began to get referrals for diagnosis. We felt a diagnosis was important:

1. *for the student* who had often been labelled 'thick', 'lazy' or 'careless', and who was often confused and anxious as well as frustrated at his or her seeming inability to learn. A diagnosis gave the student a chance to understand *why* s/he had been unable to learn in the past and to realise the specific nature of his/her difficulties. The consequences of this were usually relief that "I'm not stupid after all!" and a more constructive approach to future learning.
2. *for the tutor* to understand more clearly why the student was having such frequently perplexing problems in acquiring reading and/or spelling skills. It also clarified for the tutor the student's learning needs and helped to identify appropriate teaching methods for that particular student.

We also found that a diagnostic approach to teaching is extremely valuable in adult literacy teaching as it enables tutor and student to establish an effective, individualised learning programme and encourages independence and confidence in learning.

The diagnostic method we used is based on an educational model rather than on psychological tests for several reasons:

1. our main aim in diagnosing students was to enable them to develop effective learning strategies and tutors to adopt more specific teaching approaches appropriate to the individual student's needs, and not to 'label' them.
2. most of the named tests that psychologists use are not standardised for adults and are unreliable when used with adults
3. it is not particularly useful to student or tutor to have a battery of inappropriate test results or reading and spelling 'ages', whereas it *is* useful to know the strengths and weaknesses of a student in reading, writing and spelling.

We therefore based our diagnosis, in addition to a learning history and profile, on a miscue analysis of the student's reading, an error analysis of the student's spelling in a dictation and an analysis of the student's free writing. These methods can all be used as part of the tutor's overall teaching approach.

Miscue analysis

This method is in common use among literacy tutors and is based on Kenneth Goodman's work. A clear and useful description of it is given in Margaret Walsh's article in the ALU newsletter (Number 5, June 1979).

It is based on analysing the cuing systems that the student uses when reading. When using it for diagnostic purposes it is also important to test for comprehension, memory and sequencing ability by asking the student to summarise the passage and to answer questions on significant details. In addition, the tutor should observe the student's 'reading style': does s/he ignore punctuation? Does s/he correct his/her errors? Is s/he distracted by misprints? Does s/he read with expression or word for word?

A student with visual processing difficulties may have problems recognising words s/he knows, s/he may rely heavily on 'sounding out' and substitute nonsense words. His/her comprehension will probably be poor as s/he is using all her attention to recognise the words.

A student with auditory processing difficulties may have trouble decoding or 'breaking down' long or unfamiliar words and may rely heavily on context to work out words. However, even if s/he makes many errors, s/he may correct most of them or remember a great deal of significant detail.

The use of Venn diagrams to show the student his or her strengths and weaknesses (described in Helen Arnold's book, *Listening to Children Reading*, Hodder and Stoughton) can be valuable for the student as a beginning to understanding the reading process. Students often do not realise that the 'point' of reading is to *understand* what they read.

Spelling error analysis

This is based on the work of Margaret Peters. A dictation is given because it is important to see what the student does when attempting words s/he does not know how to spell; many students avoid words they cannot spell in their free writing; this may distort the writing and give an inaccurate picture of spelling problems.

We used five categories of error:

A	–	Logical phonetic alternatives which follow English spelling convention: hart for heart, seet for seat, mension for mention
B	–	Visual sequencing errors: dose for does, Britian for Britain
C	–	Rule oriented errors, which do *not* follow English spelling convention: citys for cities, jock for joke, stashun for station
D	–	Auditory perceptual errors; sounds missing or confused: scelye for scarcely, srambling for scrambling, natul for natural
E	–	Motor integration – repeating or adding or telescoping parts of words: beginining for beginning, rember for remember

At least 20-25 errors need to be analysed to observe a pattern of errors. Students with visual processing difficulties are more likely to have a number of errors in columns B and C; students with auditory processing errors are more likely to have a large number of errors in column D.

Students themselves sometimes gain confidence by categorising their own errors as below:

Spell it like sounds	Don't know rule	Get letters out of order	Can't hear sounds	Miss out bits

They can then see there is a 'method' to their errors and that they have most errors in one or two columns. Sometimes we have seen a spark of recognition when a student suddenly says. "That's right! *I can't* hear the sounds."

This is very useful for the tutor who can then devise appropriate strategies: for example, the student who can't discriminate sounds will find a phonic approach to spelling useless and frustrating, whereas a more visual approach of words within words will lead to success and ensuing confidence.

Developing learning support provision

We took two approaches to developing provision for students with specific learning difficulties:

- setting up specialist learning support classes
- working within literacy classes.

In both instances, however, we started with some basic principles; teaching approaches must:

1. work specifically to the student's individual needs – this is important because these students have such specific needs, eg. they may be orally competent, advanced readers and yet have severe spelling problems.
2. be based on a structured, multi-sensory approach – because the student has problems with sequential structure and a weakness in one or more areas of motor/perceptual processing
3. involve smaller 'chunks' of learning, with more opportunities for repetition review and overlearning – because of short-term memory weaknesses
4. be *meaningful* to the student – because students with specific difficulties find it hard to memorise, they rely on understanding in order to learn. They therefore need to understand *why* they should use a particular method and why it works; without such understanding they are unlikely to become effective learners.

Setting up a Spelling Programme

We established spelling as a priority for a number of reasons.

This was because:

- most of the students we saw felt that spelling was their biggest problem
- success in spelling can be easily shown; a spelling is either correct or not
- the skills mastered in learning to spell can be later transferred to more complex tasks.

We used Margaret Peters' Look, Cover, Write, Check method for all the students: the details of this are given in *Making Sense of Spelling* by Robin Millar and Cynthia Klein.

We found it to be most important when using this method to be *thorough and rigorous in following it*.

Students with specific difficulties have problems in breaking words into parts, seeing detail and remembering order. They therefore need to begin to see parts of words and to check each word letter for letter – they often do not see that they have spelled a word wrong although the correct spelling is right next to the mispelled one! Also, we found we needed to ensure that students practised their spellings over the week, to get them into their long-term memory; we often had to spend a great deal of time talking to them about memory and why they needed to practise their spellings in this particular way.

We selected spellings each week from their free writing, based on words they were using in their writing, words they *wanted* to learn, and common words or words with common letter patterns. Again we often had to engage in long discussions about the necessity to write regularly if you want to learn to spell. We found that many students mistakenly believed that they could only write *after* they learned to spell.

Students who were the most successful in improving their spelling were those who enrolled in other courses where they wrote regularly. This both generated new spellings and reinforced ones they had learned.

The other extremely important factor in achieving success was to involve the student in selecting strategies for remembering words that were specific to their particular strengths.

For students with a poor visual memory who rely on sound we suggested such strategies as making up a spelling pronunciation to remember the words, such as *Wed nes* day, or paying attention to the meaning and structure of words, rather than just the sound, as in: sign, sign/ature, divide, in/divid/ual.

We would also use spacing and highlighters to make the bits of words more visually accessible.

On the other hand, for students with auditory processing problems, we would emphasise more visual strategies, such as words within words, as in fat/her, or not/ice. Sometimes we had to look at words completely differently: one student with auditory perceptual difficulties always lost her way in long words; as she put it, she "lost the middles." For her the word 'individual' was more easily learned as: ind/ivi/dual – because the middle was a visually striking symmetrical pattern.

We selected with the student ten to twelve words per week which we grouped with others of similar letter patterns or from the same 'word family'. One hint: *never* put words with similar or confusing letter patterns on the same list, e.g. na*tion* with pas*sion* or ho*tel* with bo*ttle*.

Finally, there is nothing like a success story! This method, if practised regularly and accurately over the weekly time period and followed up by review and dictations, *works*. Students came back amazed and delighted to find they got all their words right. Their success led to greater confidence in their ability to learn – and thus to further success.

Developing learning strategies

In addition to the spelling programme, we concentrated on teaching handwriting, reading and study skills. I will briefly summarise of the main points we found in developing learning strategies in these areas.

1. Handwriting

Many students with specific difficulties have had persistent handwriting problems, such as difficulty in controlling the pen, keeping the letters even, and constructing letters so they are legible and do not disintegrate.

Often these students have been told to print as children because their writing was so messy. As adults, however, printing makes writing slower and does not allow them to use their motor or 'muscle' memory spelling. We found that by explaining this to students we could encourage them to begin to join up their writing. Often they could start this quickly by connecting easily joined letters in twos and threes at first. Some students needed more careful instruction in forming and linking letters and practice making the up, down, forward and back movements.

Other suggestions are given in Millar and Klein, (see above) By working on handwriting for brief regular periods of time, many students found with pleasure that their handwriting became neater and more fluent, and that their spellings just "rolled off the pen without thinking", as one student commented.

2. Writing

Because of structuring, organising and word retrieval difficulties, dyslexic students have great trouble planning, drafting and organising written work. They also easily get 'lost' in a sentence, so sentence structure and punctuation can be confusing. They have difficulties seeing their errors. From our work with students, we found the following three principles most useful in helping the students develop their writing skills:

a) *Emphasise self-checking*

Research has suggested that this is the most powerful tool for learning. We encouraged students to proofread, to find and correct their own errors, and to rewrite confusing sentences. Through this alone, some students made amazing 'leaps'. Sometimes listening to themselves read their writing aloud on a tape recording would help them 'hear' that something did not make sense.

b) *Offer structure*

Since structure is a major weakness for most dyslexic students, offering them ways to make plans and doing it with them can be a great boost. Giving them models of essays can help as well. Practical ideas such as using colour and 'mind maps' (see Tony Buzan's *Use Your Head*) are extremely useful. Students often found a word processor was the most helpful tool of all; many felt it 'revolutionised' their writing because they could change words and sentences without "all that crossing out" and even move paragraphs about. They also found it easier to 'see' what they had written.

c) *Discuss the writing process*

When students *understand* the reasons for the conventions of formal writing, for instance, the purpose of an introduction or the need to be explicit and give examples to back up points, they begin to feel less confused about teachers' expectations and comments on their writing. Understanding the process of drafting and editing often came as a revelation.

3. Reading and Study Skills

Students often needed to develop more effective reading strategies, such as learning to become more active readers by questioning what they read, reviewing it and looking for meaning. As they also have difficulty extracting main points when reading and when taking notes, considerable practice is needed to develop these skills as well as help in understanding the reading process.

For readers with more severe problems, considerable reinforcement and review are necessary, along with multisensory approaches (some are mentioned in the full report on the project). Often learning to spell helps these students with reading and *not* the other way round!

As a summary, we would say that we need to always make the implicit *explicit* if we are to develop effective learning strategies in students with specific difficulties.

The learning support class

Literacy classes often did not seem to meet dyslexic students' specific needs, eg. they might be needing help with spelling for writing reports at work or with planning and proofreading essays for college or polytechnic courses; or they may have failed to improve their spelling after attending a number of basic education classes. We therefore felt another model of support was needed and the learning support model seemed a fitting one.

Learning support is distinguished from other forms of basic education provision in that it offers distinctive support to a student already enrolled in other classes with a writing component or with some other workload of written tasks with which s/he needs support. Otherwise, the student is encouraged to join such a class.

A learning support class:

- does not generate new work but operates as a support for work already being done elsewhere
- is individualised and structured in its approach and methods
- concentrates on developing effective learning strategies: helping the student to understand why s/he has failed to learn in the past and to acquire new, appropriate strategies
- is available to students in an ongoing way, to facilitate progression; eg: one student started receiving learning support as a literacy student and is still using the support offered now that he is at polytechnic.

A learning support class also has to be structured differently to enable considerable time to be spent with individual students. Students needed to understand that they would be expected to work on their own or with other students for part of the time, or could leave after doing their spelling.

Much time might also be spent in discussion, giving students a chance to share their experiences as well as to learn about the nature of their difficulties, and ways to use their *strengths*.

Most dyslexic students are confused about how good spellers spell and how good writers write. They need to understand that spelling is primarily a visual-motor activity and that experienced writers plan, draft, edit and proofread.

Practice was important as understanding, however. Students who attended learning support classes over the two years of the project were asked what they found most useful; almost all of them felt that developing an effective way of learning spellings was the most valuable. All students said they felt more confident *through* becoming better spellers.

Learning support within literacy classes

Learning support can also be offered within a literacy class, particularly if it is team taught. However, we found it requires greater flexibility and careful classroom management to balance individual and group needs, particularly in a mixed level group.

With two tutors, it is possible for one to co-ordinate group work while the other works with individual students who need intensive individualised tuition. Even with one tutor, however, such intensive work with individuals is possible. In one class, the students negotiated a class structure whereby the tutor worked one to one with a student while the rest of the group took responsibility for group activities during that time. We found that encouraging the students to take charge of their own learning both made them more effective learners and freed the tutor to do individual support.

Other practical ideas are:

- letting students work in pairs, each giving the other his/her spelling dictation (which the tutor has prepared) and helping each other check their words
- putting the students' spelling words and dictations on tape
- using volunteers to work with more able students, so the class tutor can work with students with specific difficulties.

Training

Finally, a large part of the project was training tutors. Tutors generally felt they benefitted a great deal from training. Commonly, they gained confidence in taking a more diagnostic approach to teaching and felt their teaching was more methodical and effective. Many found it a relief to be able to understand why a student was not learning and to offer the student more successful learning strategies.

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